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Terrorist Target: The Diplomat

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Following is an address by Frank H. Perez, Deputy Director, Office for Combatting Terrorism, before the Conference on Terrorism sponsored by the Instituto de Cuestiones Internacionales, Madrid, Spain, June 10, 1982.

The worldwide terrorism phenomenon of the past decade and a half has impacted most severely on our Western democratic societies. The brutal tactics of terrorist groups, whether from the far left or right, have served to erode democratic institutions and civil liberties in many parts of the world. Democracies have found it difficult to cope with the tactics of terrorism and in some cases have been tempted to respond by a turn to authoritarian political structures. Terrorism also has adversely impacted diplomatic relations between nations—even friendly ones. It is this growing phenomenon of attacks against diplomats that I wish to address today.

Attacks on the Rise

In Beirut the French Ambassador is gunned down by terrorists. Several months later a French employee of the Embassy and his pregnant wife are found shot to death in their apartment. A car bomb explodes in the French Embassy compound killing 12 and injuring 25. Turkish officials are killed in Los Angeles and Boston and another is wounded in Ottawa. The Turkish consulate in Paris is seized. The American Charge in Paris narrowly escapes assassination. An Israeli attache is assassinated in Paris only 3 months after an American military attache is shot to death while on his way to the Embassy. In London, the Israeli Ambassador lies critically wounded in the hospital after being shot through the head by a terrorist. In Guatemala the Brazilian Embassy is seized. These are only some of the more recent examples of growing terrorist attacks against diplomats.

The dramatic worldwide increase in both the number and seriousness of terrorist attacks against diplomatic personnel and facilities during the past decade has adversely affected the conduct of diplomacy. In 1970 there were 213 attacks on diplomats from 31 countries. By 1980 this number had risen to 409 attacks on diplomats from 60 countries—an increase of almost 100%. The number of attacks on diplomats as a percentage of total terrorist attacks has also increased from 30% in 1975 to 54% in 1980. Unfortunately this trend exhibits no sign of abating.

World attention has focused on the fact that diplomacy has become a high-risk profession. Some 20 ambassadors from 12 countries have been assassinated (including five U.S. ambassadors—more than the number of U.S. generals killed in the Vietnam war). Between 1968 and mid-1981 there were 370 international terrorist attacks which caused death or personal injury. During 1980 alone, there were 50 such incidents, more than in any previous year. All together, 381 diplomats have been killed and 824 wounded between 1968 and

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1982. Even more ominously, assassination attempts, which have been increasing steadily over the past 10 years, reached an all-time high in 1980. The number of kidnappings and hostage barricade situations has also increased. Bombings are still the most frequent form of attack, however, since they involve little risk to the terrorist of capture and explosives can be acquired fairly easily.

The number of groups carrying out terrorist attacks has also grown almost every year. Since 1968 a total of 102 terrorist groups have claimed responsibility for terrorist attacks. In all, diplomats from 108 countries have been victims of attacks and the embassies of 88 countries have been seized by terrorists. The level of violence of attacks has also increased.

During the early years of the 1970s the terrorist threat to diplomats was primarily from low-level, small-scale violence. In recent years we have also witnessed an increase in mob violence. Between 1970 and 1980 there were some 70 forcible incursions into diplomatic facilities. However, more than 50% of these occurred after the takeover of the U.S. Embassy in Tehran, which suggests that the success achieved in that incident created a model for other terrorist groups to emulate. The potential dangers of such acts were borne out when 39 people, including several Spanish diplomats, were killed when the Spanish Embassy in Guatemala was seized in 1980.

Why the Diplomat?

All terrorist attacks involve the use of violence for purposes of political extortion, coercion, and publicity for a political cause. The terrorist uses his victims as tools to achieve these goals, regardless of the fact that those targeted are rarely directly associated with the area of political conflict. Although some may argue that attacks against diplomats are senseless, in the mind of the terrorist it is a calculated act with deliberate political goals and objectives.

Diplomats are highly visible and desirable targets for several reasons, including their symbolic value and the psychological impact created. Attacks against diplomats evoke a response from the highest levels of two governments—that of the diplomat attacked and that of the host country. Terrorists are also able to command worldwide media attention for the duration of the incident. Terrorist groups single out diplomats perhaps because they perceive that in order to obtain the publicity they seek, they must strike at increasingly more visible and symbolic targets.

Terrorist attacks on diplomats almost always are perpetrated by well-trained and experienced terrorist organizations. These groups are well organized and are seeking specific political goals. For example, two Armenian terrorist groups have conducted a campaign of terror directed against Turkish diplomats in revenge for alleged atrocities which were committed over 60 years ago. Some 20 Turkish diplomats and members of their families have been killed in recent years by Armenian terrorists in numerous countries, for example in Spain, where in 1978 the Turkish Ambassador's wife, her brother, and their chauffeur were killed. We in the United States have not been immune to the violence perpetrated by Armenian terrorist organizations. In January of this year the Turkish Consul General in Los Angeles was gunned down and the Honorary Turkish Consul in Boston was murdered in a similar fashion in early May. Earlier a car bomb was detonated in front of the Turkish U.N. mission injuring several people.

An Increasing Toll

Terrorism unfortunately has taken its toll on state-to-state relations. Relations between countries can be adversely affected if one country believes that another is failing to provide adequate protection to its diplomats or to live up to its responsibilities. For example, Franco-Turkish and Franco-Spanish relations have suffered because of a perceived laxity in French prosecution and extradition of terrorists. The Dominican Republic Embassy seizure in Bogota in 1980, by the April 19th Movement (M–19) in which 15 senior diplomats were held for 61 days, caused considerable strains in relations between the Government of Colombia and some of the countries whose ambassadors were held hostage. The recent slayings of Turkish officials in the United States interjects strain in an otherwise close U.S.-Turkish relationship.

Also, sponsorship of terrorist acts by one country against another can seriously disrupt diplomatic intercourse and normal relations. Last year, for example, Colombia suspended diplomatic relations with Cuba because of its training in Cuba of Colombian M–19 terrorists. One of the principal reasons for expelling Libyan representatives from Washington was the continuing support by the Qadhafi regime to international terrorist activities, including those directed against U.S. officials. U.S. relations with other countries and groups have been adversely affected by their sponsorship of acts of international terrorism, such as the Letelier assassination in Washington carried out by Chilean agents and the continued resort to international terrorism by various elements of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). The disastrous effects of the seizure of American diplomats on U.S.-Iranian relations need no further elaboration.

Countries whose diplomats have been victimized represent a wide range of ideologies, geographic locations, sizes, and wealth. However, all attacks on diplomats have one element in common: All terrorist attacks are acts of political violence. The terrorist is seeking to redress a political grievance, overthrow a political system, or publicize a political point of view. I was a firsthand witness to the events in Bogota which occurred when the M–19 held diplomats from 15 countries hostage in the Embassy of the Dominican Republic for 61 days, demanding publicity for their cause, freedom for imprisoned members of their organization, and ransom. Although the Government of Colombia did not accede to the major terrorist demands, the terrorists did obtain widespread publicity for their cause. A relatively obscure terrorist organization was suddenly catapulted into the international spotlight and thereby increased greatly its prominence within Colombia and internationally.

It is the symbolism of the individual terrorist act, and not necessarily the act itself, which gives it significance. The terrorist uses the act to make a political statement to the target (which is not the victim) and to the world at large. Thus, U.S. diplomats who were held in Tehran for 444 days were used as pawns to advance political objectives internally of the group that held them as well as to achieve objectives with regard to the U.S. Government and to the rest of the world.

While the functions of representation, negotiation, and intelligence gathering continue, embassies are now conducting diplomacy in the face of an increasingly violent environment under conditions never before experienced. The level of security surrounding diplomatic personnel and facilities has been increased to unprecedented levels in an attempt to deter terrorist attacks. As embassy security has become more stringent, it has become more difficult to conduct diplomatic business in a normal fashion. Many embassies now resemble military installations, surrounded by high walls and barbed wire. Buildings are equipped with automatic tear gas

dispensers, ballistic glass, and closed-circuit TV. Visitors are searched and made to pass through metal detectors under the scrutiny of armed guards. Embassy personnel are often transported in armored vehicles.

The cost of protecting diplomats abroad has also soared. The Department of State now spends annually about 14% (around $140 million) of its entire budget on security, and this figure has been rising steadily. This is in addition to protection provided to U.S. diplomatic facilities and personnel overseas by host governments which would cost us an additional $200 million annually if the U.S. Government had to provide it.

While precautions are certainly necessary, the effect has been a reduction in access and a corresponding reduction in the level of communications between diplomats and the host country, in particular, the people of the country. Diplomats are finding it increasingly difficult to function well in this environment.

Enhanced Security Measures

In 1980, for the first time since 1968 when the U.S. Government first began keeping statistics on terrorism, U.S. diplomats surpassed U.S. businessmen as the most frequent victims of terrorist attacks overseas, in spite of the fact that U.S. businessmen greatly outnumber U.S. diplomats. To deal with this problem, the United States has undertaken a rigorous campaign to enhance the security of our personnel and facilities overseas. Primarily we are attempting to reduce the vulnerability of our diplomatic missions by constructing perimeter defenses, building secure safehavens to which staff can retreat in the event of an attack, improving access controls, and installing nonlethal entry denial systems. Other protective measures involve added guards, armored cars, and the like. All State Department employees are also required to attend a seminar on "Coping with Violence Abroad" in order to make them aware of security problems and educate them on how to reduce their vulnerability. Intelligence collection and analysis on terrorist groups has been accorded a much higher priority and has paid off in terms of alerting us to possible attacks against our diplomatic personnel and facilities.

Need for International Cooperation

If we are to deal more effectively with this problem over the long run, better international cooperation will be required. While diplomats from the United States, Israel, the Soviet Union, the United Kingdom, Cuba, and Turkey have been the most frequent targets, terrorism is a complex and universal problem shared by all nations of the world. Virtually no state has been left unaffected by terrorism. Nations must work together to take steps to deter and prevent terrorist violence from escalating. Such necessary steps include a greater exchange of information on terrorists and their movements, tighter controls on the movement of weapons and explosives, and more efficient extradition procedures for accused terrorists.

The international community must also develop a consensus that acts of terrorism should be outlawed and that those who commit them should be brought to justice. The international community took a major step in this regard in 1973 when it adopted the U.N. Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of Crimes Against Internationally Protected Persons, Including Diplomatic Agents, commonly referred to as the New York convention. Adhering states must either extradite or prosecute persons alleged to have committed violations of the convention. The convention's effectiveness, however, has been hampered by the fact that only 53 nations have ratified it.

Recognition of the problem has continued with the adoption of the 1979 U.N. Convention Against the Taking of Hostages, which now has been ratified by 17 nations; 22 ratifications are required before the convention enters into force. In 1980 the General Assembly adopted a Resolution on Measures to Enhance the Protection, Security and Safety of Diplomatic and Consular Missions and Representatives, which was reaffirmed last year.

The New York convention and other international agreements relating to the protection of diplomatic personnel and premises are steps in the right direction of establishing an international consensus and body of law outlawing crimes against diplomats. However, they must be strengthened and built on to establish norms of behavior by seeking to discourage nations who would condone and support terrorists and terrorism and to encourage nations to take more seriously their obligations to protect diplomats.

Obligation of Nations

All nations have an obligation to provide protection for diplomats accredited to them. The universally accepted Vienna convention requires states to "take all appropriate steps to prevent attack" on the "person, freedom or dignity" of foreign diplomatic and consular personnel. A violation of this obligation, regardless of the cause, is always disturbing. Of particular concern, however, is state complicity or acquiescence in acts of terrorism directed against diplomatic personnel and facilities. State-sponsored and -supported terrorism, whatever the target, is the most egregious form of terrorism. But when the target is the representative of another country, the act takes on an entirely new dimension and we see an erosion of the principle of diplomatic inviolability.

The Libyan Government is one which has engaged in targeting for violence the diplomats of other countries, specifically the United States. For example, the Government of Libya was behind the sacking of the U.S. Embassy in Tripoli. Last November, Sudanese authorities successfully thwarted a Libyan plot to plant explosive devices in the American Club in Khartoum. The bombs, consisting of two stereo speakers each packed with 20 kilograms of plastic explosives, were intended to explode on a weekend evening when the club would be filled with the families of U.S. Embassy staff and other Americans. Bombs of this size could have completely destroyed the club, killing or maiming scores of people, including third-country diplomats who use the club. We know that these devices were prepared by Libyan intelligence officers assigned to a Libyan People's Bureau in a neighboring country and that a Libyan intelligence officer personally insured that the bombs were loaded on a flight to Khartoum.

Outlook

I realize that I have painted a bleak picture of the current situation regarding diplomats and terrorism. What, you may ask, can be done to alleviate this problem? The problem is one of increasing intensity and the future, unfortunately, does not look any brighter. Attacks on diplomats have proven to be extremely cost effective for the amount of worldwide attention they generate and for that reason they are likely to continue.

Obviously, we will have to continue to do more of what we have been doing (e.g., more and better intelligence and more effective security measures and procedures), although one eventually reaches the point of diminishing returns. At the same time, like-minded nations must intensify ways of improving cooperation among themselves with a view to reducing the disruption caused by terrorism to international relations and stability, particularly with regard to the protection of diplomatic premises and staff.

Governments which sponsor or condone acts of terrorism against diplomats must be made to understand that such conduct will not be tolerated by the international community. Likewise, everything possible must be done to bring to justice swiftly those perpetrators of heinous crimes against the civilized world. The challenge of preventing attacks against diplomats and the disruption of diplomatic intercourse must be a topic high on the agenda of the world community. ■

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